

“I Am Punjab, I Am Farmer”: Punjab-I-Yat, An Ethical Resonance From West Punjab To East Punjab

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Abstract

The study intends to establish *Punjab-i-yat*, as an ethnicity beyond time and space. The paper is built on the song titled, ‘Punjab’, sung by Waqar Bhinder, a Pakistani singer. Set against the backdrop of the Indian Farmers’ Protest (2020-2021), Bhinder, claims to have sung the song out of empathy for the Punjab farmers. Bhinder, shares ethnic connection with the farmers in East Punjab, he reiterates, “Our roots are one, our language is one, and we are farmers too” (n.pag.), The song is thus, a symbolic connection of shared descent, language and history. Referring to “*Charda Punjab nayi o kalla soch lo, lehnde walon aaoo ga jawab gadwan*” (2:10-2:16): (Keep in mind that East Punjab is not all alone, a hard-hitting reply will be given by West Punjab too) gives rise to *Punjab-i-yat* - a timeless and boundaryless sense of oneness. The Farmers’ Protest and the song, eventually lay the bedrock of the paper to establish various dimensions of *Punjab-i-yat*. Conclusively, through the song, erupts an ethical resonance from West Punjab to East Punjab, echoing “I am Punjab, I am farmer”

Key terms: *Punjab-i-yat*, ethnicity, Farmers’ Protest (2020-2021), West Punjab, East Punjab

Introduction

Our roots are one, our language is one, and we are farmers too. We understand the pain of our brothers in Indian Punjab -Waqar Bhinder

One of the finest ways to describe a person is through its ethnicity. *Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines ethnicity as something “relating to large groups of people classed according to common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin” (P.2). Apparently, ethnicity can be described as a characteristic of belonging to a particular congregation; a group or a subgroup that share a connection based on nationality, religion, gender, class, caste, race, occupation, age, descent, shared history, language, folklore etc. An Indian, a Muslim, a girl, a bourgeoisie, a Shudra, a black, a doctor, a Punjabi etc., are a few commonly used introductory replies to one’s identity. Ethnicity as a noun situates itself through ethnic as a noun and an adjective. As a noun, ethnic refers to a social group that has a particular worldview- the worldview that is

generated over years and then transmitted through generations via stories, symbols and rituals, while as an adjective, ethnic refers to the quality of being associated with a particular social group. Thus, ‘ethnicity’ as a discourse establishes itself by oscillating between ‘ethnic’ as a noun and an adjective.

From the mid-sixteenth Century to the World-Wars to British rule, India has had a long history of migration. Richard B. Allen, in his paper titled, “Indian Ocean transoceanic migration, 16th–19th century”, lucidly, confirms that “The movement of millions of slaves, forced, and free laborers, was the most important feature of transoceanic migration in the Indian Ocean world between 1500 and 1900. Furthermore, the 1947, Indo-Pak partition, strictly based on religion lead to the migration of people in flux across borders. Witnessing a massive division in 1947, the partition of Punjab province was one of its subsets”. (Allen 5)

An article titled, “Partition of the Punjab” on The Sikh Encyclopaedia gives a

detailed history of the division of Punjab province. Punjab was a province of British India. Most of the Punjab region was annexed by the East India Company in 1849, which in 1858, came under the direct rule of the British crown. With an area of 358,354.5 km², Punjab province comprised of five administrative divisions namely Delhi, Jullundur, Lahore, Multan, and Rawalpindi – and a number of princely states. However, Punjab was marked with a certain peculiar feature unlike the rest of the provinces of undivided India. The most obvious was the presence of Sikhs significantly. Additionally, in Punjab there was a Unionist party- much different from both Congress and Muslim league — claiming itself to be a party of farmers and also ruling Punjab between 1937-42. Apparently, based on religion, the area majorly dominated by Sikhs and Hindus emerged as East Punjab becoming a part of the new nation of India, whereas the area largely dominated by Muslims emerged as West Punjab becoming a part of the new nation of the Dominion of Pakistan. The name Punjab comes from the key words, ‘punj’ means five and ‘ab’ means water, popularly known as the land of five rivers. Profuse in water supply, Punjab enjoys the natural benefit of fertile soil that conclusively promotes farming as its oldest occupation. However, the division of Punjab post 1947 gave rise to ethnic groups across borders. The people in West Punjab in Pakistan and East Punjab in India, connect ethnically on shared descent, language, culture and occupation. Subsequently, giving rise to a sense of oneness, the essence of being Punjabi-generically referred to as *Punjab-i-yat*, emanates.

Punjab-i-yat, highlighting the ‘essence of Punjab’, ‘quintessential Punjabi’, is fundamentally an expression of Punjabi culture cocooned in its land of fertile soil, yelling loud ‘I am a farmer, I am a farmer’. Clearly, farming and Punjab go hand-in-hand. Subsequently, any law clashing with the interest of farmers is bound to resonate the repercussions. The three-farm-laws passed by the Indian government in September, 2020 created a bone of contention

between the farmer unions and the government. The farmers protested the privatization of farming, fearing the controlled cultivation and price regulation by the corporates. The Indian Farmers Protest, led by Samyukt Kisan Morcha is one such example, that set its foot through ‘Delhi chalo’ movement, intending to protest against the laws that would pave way for dismantling of the minimum support price and would leave them at the mercy of big corporate entities. An article titled, “The Farmers Protest: Tale of a Unified Community”, candidly states, “The protest initiated by Kisaan Ekta isn’t just a movement, it’s an emotion, a connection [and] a community. Irrespective of age, gender, caste, nationality, or religion a community came together. The world related to the suffering of farmers empathized with them. This is the tale of our providers and a community that provided for!” (P.6). Barred from entering Delhi, the farmers initiated the protest at the border- Tikri, Singhu and Ghazipur. Building on the peaceful protest, the farmer camps were established at Delhi borders, where farmers offered *langars* to meet the daily food needs of the ten thousand farmers. As stated in the article in *The Wire*, by Deepanshu Mohan, he states “After a year-long agitation against the three controversial farm laws ended with their repeal, thousands of protesting farmers at Tikri, Singhu and Ghazipur borders celebrated the moment. Some took the soil from the protest sites in a jar for memory while others clicked photos, hugged and cried in bliss after long drawn resistance against a ruling establishment that remained unmoved by the appeals of protesting farmers, for far too long” (Deepanshu 7). The 2020-2021 Indian farmer’s protest against the three farm acts passed by the Parliament of India in September 2020, is one such incident, that on the basis of *Punjab-i-yat* connected the Punjabi ethnic groups from West Punjab and East Punjab.

Observing the plight of farmers protesting at Delhi borders, famous Pakistani tik-toker/singer, Waqar Bhinder, released a song named, ‘Punjab’ in support of the farmers’

protest. Speaking on a Pakistani You Tube channel, Punjabi Leher, he said that “he was inspired to sing the song out of empathy for the Punjab farmers. Our roots are one, our language is one, and we are farmers too” (0:0:38). The Pakistani song titled ‘Punjab’ was released during the Indian farmer protest, expresses admiration for Indian farmers from Punjab protesting at Delhi borders and concomitantly assures support from Pakistan Punjab. Punjabi Lehar, a Pakistan channel is an attempt to bridge a gap between the people of East and West Punjab. It is a medium to celebrate *Punjab-i-yat*, and thus stand firm in support of preserving their ethnicity beyond borders.

The current paper titled, “I am Punjab, I am farmer”: Punjab-i-yat, an Ethical Resonance from West Punjab to East Punjab” is divided into three parts. The first part titled; ‘Introduction’ discusses ethnicity in general and then *Punjab-i-yat* in specificity. The second part titled, ‘Thematic Analysis’ actively builds on the primary text: the song, ‘Punjab’ to discuss *Punjab-i-yat* in relation to the historical emergence of the West and the East Punjab. It further delves deeper into examining various nuances of *Punjab-i-yat* as an ethnicity-discussing Farmers’ Protest in the wake of the timeless and boundaryless connection of Punjabi as an essence. The third part of the paper is the ‘conclusion’ which culminates *Punjab-i-yat*, as an ethnicity.

Thematic Analysis

Ethnicity is based on a shared feeling on multiple grounds like region, religion, nation, continent, gender, geography etc. Ethnicity of an individual keeps changing from place to place, apparently, ethnicity as a discourse, emerges as an elastic process. Following in an elaborated example of the elastic nature of ethnicity: a person from Punjab when meets another person from Punjab in any state outside Punjab- let’s assume U.P, will connect on grounds of being a Punjabi- surfacing ethnicity on the basis of region, referred to as ethno-region. Additionally, the same person when meets another person from India in any nation

outside India- let’s assume Canada, will connect on grounds of being an Indian- surfacing ethnicity on the basis of nation, referred to as ethno-nation. Furthermore, the same person meeting another person from Asia in any other continent- let’s say, Africa, will connect on grounds of being an Asian- surfacing ethnicity on the basis of continent, referred to as ethno-continent. Plausibly, the identity of the same person shifting from being a Punjabi to Indian to Asian- emphasises on the dynamic nature of ethnicity. Thus, in order to identify the same person, depending upon its movement across helps in exploring various layers of ethnicity- ethno-region, ethno-nation, ethno-continent surmount.

The current paper is based on one such examination of a type of ethnicity, grounded on shared history- *Punjab-i-yat*; referred to as ethno-history. Farming being the core-subject- the recent Indian Farmers’ Protest (2020-2021), brings together the East (now in India) and the West Punjab (now in Pakistan). The Indian farmers from East Punjab fighting for the preservation of their farming rights against the Indian central government, illumine the ethos of the West Punjab. Based on the shared history of partition of the Province of Punjab, the plight of the Indian farmers awakens the emotions of the West Punjab. Comprehensively, Waqar Bhinder, a popular Pakistani Singer from West Punjab, along with few of his other confidants namely, Shahzad Sidhu, AR Wattoo, Ijaz Ghoug and Mansoor Ahmad, releases a song titled, ‘Punjab’ in support of the Indian Farmers’ Protest (2020-2021). In this case, the ethnicity is based on farming, Punjab, and the shared history, thus, *Punjab-i-yat*, arousing a sense of oneness between the West and the East Punjab bags a central role.

The song ‘Punjab’ expresses admiration for Indian farmers from Punjab protesting at Delhi borders and assures support from West Punjab. The song is a glorification of the community of farmers, considerably known for their hard-work, commitment and strength. Lucidly validated through the song, “Ae oh comm aa je na dhaka karde aa ten na

dhaka sarde aa, aae tan sapaa de sire the pair rakhke kheta den nakke band karde" (0:23-0:30) [This is the community that neither does injustice nor tolerates injustice, this is rather a community that by stepping on snakes stops the flow of the water in the fields]. A week after the release of the song, it gathered around 8 lakh hits, displaying its widespread acceptance globally. Harping over the oneness of the two Punjabs by supporting the ongoing farmers' protest, **Punjab-i-yat**, as an ethical essence of being from an undivided Punjab surface. Notably, one of the things that kept the farmers spirited was the support of several Punjabi singers from across borders, whose songs hit the chord of revolution and resistance. Besides, the denied entry to farmers in Delhi by the government, paved way to their settlement in camps at Singhu and Tikri borders at Delhi. The song starts with highlighting the impulse of farming within the farmers, wherein, farming runs within the blood of the farmers, which keeps them from staying idle. Reiterating the same, Bhinder sings, "*Charde syal laye maut naal pherey, Punjab de kisaana laaye Dilli vich dere, Kisan banda kade vella nayi rehnda, ae gall ghol ke Dilli de kanna vich paati*" (2:4-2:9) [The farmers have pitched their tents outside Delhi in the height of winters. A farmer never remains idle the point perfectly infused into the ears of Indian Central Government]. This aptly states the obsession of the farmers with their farms/land/crop. The Farmers' Protest is marked by scores of *langars* and makeshift kitchens, that were meticulously deployed by farmer's organizations and NGOs to meet the food needs of the farmers in the camps and across. These *langars* served 24*7 irrespective of caste, class, or religion, serving lentils, seasonal vegetables, roti, buttermilk, and tea, setting a live example of the grand celebration of farm and farming. Bhinder sings, "*ae tan oo com aa jene divider ten pyaj di paniri laati* (1:02-1:03) [this is the community that while protesting at Delhi has started cultivating onions too]. The song here illumines **Punjab-i-yat**, an ethnicity grounded on shared occupation, where in farming/cultivation

emerges as a shared sense of oneness between the West and the East Punjab.

Kusum Arora through an article published in *The Wire* elucidates the plight of the farmers in the protest. On 9 August 2020, the farmers from Punjab and Haryana marched to Delhi in protest against the controversial laws. On 24 September 2020, farmers started a "*Rail roko*", (stop the trains) campaign and on 25 November 2020, yet another campaign *Dilli Chalo* (let us go to Delhi) came into practice. The police employed the use of tear gas and water cannons, and used layers of barricades and sand barriers to stop the protesters, leading to a series of causality of farmer. Looking at the consistent efforts of the East Punjab farmers, the farmers from the West Punjab came in support. Subsequently, connecting through **Punjab-i-yat**, as an ethnicity, based on the past historical division of Punjab province into the West and the East Punjab, the song sates, "*Karlo hisab hona mahul ae kharab jado ralgae Punjab eknal* (1:58-2:2) [So just imagine the situation in case Punjab from both the sides join hands]. "*Charda Punjab nayi o kalla soch lo, lehnde walon aao ga jawab gadwan* (2:10-2:16) [Keep in mind that East Punjab is not all alone, a hard-hitting reply will be given by West Punjab too]. Furthermore, the song situates its hold through the lines, "*khoon Khane da ve ooe, khoon Lahore da vi oee, khoon laylpur aale Ludhiana bolde*" (1:8-1:10) [the blood in Khana is the same as that in Lahore, and the one in Lyallpur is the same in Ludhiana]. **Punjab-i-yat** as an ethnicity, is consequently built on the shared blood- Lahore, Ludhiana, Lyallpur, candidly reflected through the song highlighting oneness,

The shared history of pain and suffering of Indo-Pak partition comes afresh, as Bhinder adds an impulse of remembrance of the roots, he sings, "*Pae se je vand Santali vele de, rachi pae aa hada viche cheesh banke, dasiya se gala jedi babiya ne jo, niklnegi hunh o reech tan ke, pehlediya likiya haje tapiya he naiya, nava jo kisani ala mudaa chedta*" (0:30-0:45) [The injury caused in 1947 is forever alive in our hearts, the stories of partition told by our

ancestors is afresh, and will now erupt through this song. The past injuries are not yet cured, while the novice pain on the farming has been initiated]. The song 'Punjab' is a repetitive reminder of the shared history of the 1947 partition- the loss of the roots and the loved ones., "*Charda Punjab awaaz mare lenda nu, suta shera ched ta* (1:7-1:12) [East Punjab yelling loud is like a wild sound produced by the tiger who is triggered from its deep slumber]. Comprehensively, the song 'Punjab' runs parallel with the Farmers' Protest, metaphorically representing the farmers as tigers who had repressed the past partition pain into slumber of a tiger, which has now been triggered hard, resulting in the current protest and the violent outcry. The outcry is the symbol of the age-old repression of the identity- "Punjabi, "I am Punjab, I am farmer". However, the outcry was doused by labelling the protestors as terrorists. The words of resistance then emerged from West Punjab, clearly confronting the brutal litany of abuse, "*aaj akiri kisan antvandi hogya, aap de kheta de ban ke gulam aj e kisan jazbati hogya*" (1:32-1:41) [The farmers raising their voice to preserve their fields/their motherland have been declared terrorists, the farmers looking at their fields have now grown emotional). Subsequently, the province of Punjab divided into the West and the East Punjab has now assembled on *Punjab-i-yat*. an ethnicity that surfaces on the shared pain of partition, shared pain of losing the roots, yet, connecting on farming as an occupation. Apparently, through the song, Bhinder in one of the interviews, with Pakistani You Tube channel, "Punjabi Leher", while empathising for the Punjab farmers, states, "Our roots are one, our language is one, and we are farmers too. We understand the pain of our brothers in Indian Punjab" (Y. 2020). Conclusively, the study unlaces the dimensions of *Punjab-i-yat*, as an ethnicity- where in the shared history, the occupation, the blood and the language connect the West and the East Punjab, *apparently*, making an ethical resonance, "We have one voice, one message, we the farmers, we the Punjab." (Y. 2020)

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